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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000258

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SUBJECT: MUSLIM REPRESSION AND RESENTMENT NEAR BURMA'S
BORDER WITH BANGLADESH

Classified By: COM CARMEN MARTINEZ. REASON: 1.5 (D)

1. (C) Summary: The Burmese regime's repression of the mostly Muslim population of northern Rakhine State, located along the border with Bangladesh, is breeding resentment and poverty. DCM visited the area in mid-February as part of a trip to the region organized by UNHCR for diplomats. UNHCR's protective services are limiting the oppression and its coordination of NGO and other UN agency projects is providing the only development effort in the region. The security forces in northern Rakhine State, reportedly numbering 8,000, are an extractive presence, largely self-financing and/or self-enriching. Incidents of forced labor have fallen due to the completion of a UN-supported gravel road that has reduced the security forces' need for forced portage to isolated outposts. End Summary

2. (SBU) POOR, CROWDED, AND ISOLATED: The three townships (akin to counties in the U.S.) nearest the Bangladesh border in Rakhine State have a population of 800,000, the vast majority of whom are Bengali-speaking Muslims. About a quarter of a million people in this area have returned to Burma after fleeing as refugees to Bangladesh in the 1990s. By almost any socio-economic measure this is Burma's poorest and most crowded rural region--the UN reports 61% of children are malnourished and 35% are severely stunted. The area consists of mountainous peninsulas flanked by tidal estuaries that are too brackish for irrigation. The 18 feet of rain per year falls in 5 months, meaning there are two seasons: dust and mud. There is no motorable road connection with Bangladesh--the only official entry point from Bangladesh is the estuary port of Maungdaw.

3. (C) NO RECENT INSURGENT ACTIVITY: According to residents, NGO and UN expatriates, and UN and NGO staff members intimately familiar with the region, there has been no serious insurgent activity in northern Rakhine State for several years (notwithstanding insurgent press releases). One source claimed the last major incident was in 1994. A French NGO worker related an incident from 2001 in which four members of the security forces were murdered at night in their camp. He believed it had something to do with forced prostitution or trafficking in women and was probably not insurgent related. After the murders, her continued, the security forces rounded up the inhabitants of a nearby village and penned them in a field for two days with no food or water. Two toddlers, who were left at the village, reportedly died. Other sources said that occasional slit throats or stabbings are sometimes vaguely attributed to "the RSO" (the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, commonly used to refer to any Muslim insurgents), but are likely the result of local resentments and outraged husbands or fathers. "RSO" members (i.e., militant Muslim refugees) total about 200 individuals, according to one informed local estimate.

3. (C) RAPACIOUS SECURITY FORCES: UN sources report that there are some 8,000 security force personnel occupying about 80 sites in the three townships. Most are members of the hybrid Burmese border patrol known as NaSaKa (the Burmese acronym for Border Immigration HQ). Nearly every bridge, tunnel, intersection, hamlet, and government building is "guarded" by a detachment of armed men. We met with the notorious NaSaKa commander Aung Ngwe who is such an egregious abuser of human rights, even by Burmese military standards, that he was previously ordered back to Rangoon for a sharp reprimand. However, he is back commanding the border region, with his actions unchanged, according to locals.

4 (C) SECURITY FORCES SELF-FINANCING, SELF-ENRICHING: UN and NGO staffers say the security forces extract revenue and labor from the local population at every opportunity, in part, they contend, because the SPDC has made the conscious decision to make security operations there self-financing. This approach has the added "benefit" of dampening the pull factor from even more-crowded nearby areas of Bangladesh, they add. For example, Aung Ngwe has licensed nearly every conceivable economic activity to a crony, friend, or partner. Poor woodcutters must sell their daily cuttings to the monopoly licensee for 8 kyat a bundle; Aung Ngwe's buddy turns around and sells it for 20 kyat. We drove through a large GOB cashew plantation. Aung Ngwe personally pockets the proceeds from the cashew nuts, we were told, but allows the villagers who pick the crop to keep some of the cashew fruit. Every checkpoint extracts a 50 kyat fee or a pack of

cigarettes from the cargo bicycles that move rice and provisions through the township. Aung Ngwe even sold the right to charge tolls on a bridge connecting the port of Maungdaw to the center of town--the tollbooth has since been removed after UN complaints. Muslims routinely must bribe officials to travel within or between the three townships.

15. (C) HUMAN RIGHTS: The UNHCR documents reports of incidents of forced labor and forced contributions in the area. The number of incidents has fallen in 2002, the UNHCR explains, not because of a change in GOB policy or action, but because of the completion of a road financed by a WFP food-for-work project and the Japanese NGO BAJ. This road allows NaSaKa easier motorized access to hitherto isolated outposts close to the Bangladesh border and has reduced the need for portage services of the locals.

-- At one village the Australian DCM was slipped a note by a person requesting protection/support from GOB oppression. A UNHCR staffer said, "Bad news. MI minders saw the note being passed, so now we'll have to visit this village two or three times a week for the next couple of months to make sure that everybody here is ok."

-- DCM spoke with one landless Muslim man who, amid tears, explained that his daughter was in jail and he had no money to pay for transport to the township capital, bribe the soldiers at the numerous checkpoints along the way, or to bribe the judge. His daughter had accused the GOB-appointed village headman of sexual assault, as had another young woman in the village. When NaSaka commander Aung Ngwe heard of the accusation against the village headman (his friend), he ordered the two women arrested. The village headman is also in jail, but has access to resources to sway the outcome of proceedings, our contacts explained.

16. (C) RETURNEES AND UNHCR: About 25 refugees per week are returning from Bangladesh--all by boat through the river port of Maungdaw. UNHCR estimates approximately 5,000 will be willing and able to return by time of the closure of the UNHCR repatriation program at the end of June. This means that weekly returnee rates will need to increase at least ten-fold to meet this deadline. Once out of the repatriation business, UNHCR staffers admitted that they will be hard-pressed to justify the continuation of their programs in the border area, which in reality are a mix of UNDP-type development activities and normal ICRC protective services.

17. (SBU) WHAT'S IN A NAME?: When returning refugees are processed at Maungdaw UNHCR helps them fill out the immigration and customs forms. Returnees are asked to declare their ethnicity, nationality, and religion. The standard and approved method by which UNHCR helps fill out the cards yields the following: Ethnicity - Bengali; Nationality - Myanmar; Religion - Muslim. While the returnees are not considered citizens of Myanmar, they are apparently considered nationals.

-- DCM did not once hear the word "Rohingya" used by anyone to describe Muslim Bengali-speakers. Rather, "Muslim" is used. One Muslim local staffer explained he had once written Rohingya on a form, but was told by the local authorities not to use it.

-- "RSO" is commonly used to describe any Muslim insurgents, frequently accompanied by a vague wave in the direction of the Bangladeshi border.

-- Buddhist Rakhine-speakers are usually called Rakhines.

-- Arakan, another term for the state, people, and language, was used in private conversation by pro-democracy individuals in the ancient Arakan capital of Mrauk-Oo and elsewhere. Aung San Suu Kyi and her allies in the Arakan League for Democracy also use "Arakan."

-- Almost everybody used Yangon and Myanmar vice Rangoon and Burma, but quite a few people used Burmese (vice Myanmar) when referring to the language and "Myanmar people" when referring to the Burmese nationality. Several Arakanese voiced lingering resentment at the destruction of the capital city of Mrauk-Oo by Burmese invaders in 1754.

-- Nobody used the older term "Akyab" for the city of Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State.

18. (C) THE STATUS OF ISLAM: The practice of Islam is not restricted, commander Aung Ngwe assured us. Indeed, we saw many Muslims worshipping throughout the area. One catch is that the authorities prohibit the construction or repair of mosques. As a result, most mosques are in severe disrepair. In Maungdaw, the largest city in the (almost completely Muslim) township of 431,000 people, the central mosque has no roof. On a Muslim holiday we witnessed thousands of worshippers crowded into what in effect was an courtyard enclosed by a brick wall painted green--and this in a city

that gets 18 feet of rain per year.

19. (C) INDIAN PLANS IN THE AREA: During the many hours we spent traveling on the broad rivers of northern Rakhine, the Indian ambassador detailed an approved GOI-GOB plan to connect NE India to the Bay of Bengal via a road-river link utilizing the Kaladan River. India and Burma would dredge and, where needed, widen, the Kaladan River to enable cargo ships to ply most of the distance between Sittwe and the Indian border. The northern-most link would entail about 40 miles of blacktopped road. A cargo terminal would be built at Sittwe and at the navigable northern end of the Kaladan River, he reported. This route will cut by three-quarters the transport time for goods between NE India and Calcutta, he claimed. Survey and planning has commenced, he added, with the project to be concluded "in about six years."

10. (C) COMMENT: The GOB policies in northern Rakhine are a wonderful example of how not to win friends and influence people. The seething resentment is almost palpable and is, in fact, visible. As we traveled by boat up the rivers and estuaries from central to northern Rakhine State, the UNHCR staff suggested that we note the reaction of people along the riverbanks to our presence. Sure enough, during the first part of the voyage people called out, smiled, and waved as we sped past. Further on, folks wouldn't even return a wave, and often stepped back into the brush as we approached. The change occurred about the same place Buddhist temples stopped appearing in villages. The Muslim-majority townships felt like an area suffering from an oppressive occupier, with Islam the prime uniting and potentially mobilizing force. End Comment.
Martinez